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DE RUEHBS #1560/01 3241742
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 201742Z NOV 09 ZDK
FM USEU BRUSSELS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BRUSSELS 001560

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [EUN](#)
SUBJECT: NEW EU LEADERSHIP: VAN ROMPUY AND ASHTON
EMERGE TO JOIN BARROSO

REF: A) BRUSSELS 1521, B) BRUSSELS 1522,
C) BRUSSELS 1414

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SUMMARY

11. Belgian PM Herman Van Rompuy and EU Trade Commissioner Catherine Ashton (UK) were selected by the 27 European Union (EU) leaders November 19 to become, respectively, permanent President of the European Council and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The deal appears to have been reached after UK PM Brown realized he could not maintain Tony Blair's candidacy for the President's job and proposed Ashton for the High Rep's position, clearing the way for a balanced ticket. After a surprisingly brief meeting of the EU-27, Swedish PM Reinfeldt introduced the new leadership of Europe. Reinfeldt also announced the new Secretary-General (SG) of the EU Council, Frenchman Pierre de Boissieu, currently Deputy SG. Van Rompuy, who will take up his duties on January 1, 2010, said his new position would bring more coherence and continuity to the work of EU leaders, and that his personal opinions would be subordinate to the Council's. The nomination of Ashton, who will serve as a Commission Vice-President, remains subject to the European Parliament's approval of the new Barroso Commission. The nominee, who will be the interlocutor of the Secretary, countered critics who noted she was never elected to public office and had little experience of foreign policy issues, by saying: Judge me by what I do. END SUMMARY.

EASIER THAN EXPECTED

12. Belgian PM Herman Van Rompuy (politically center-right, ref A) and EU Trade Commissioner Catherine Ashton (UK-politically center-left) were selected by EU leaders November 19 to become, under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty (ref B), permanent President of the European Council and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, respectively. The deal appears to have been reached after UK PM Brown realized he could not maintain Tony Blair's candidacy for the President's job and made the forceful step (according to a British spokesman) of proposing Ashton for the High Rep position at a meeting of Socialist and Social Democrat leaders ahead of the EU-27 working dinner, a move that met several criteria, including the rising call for a woman to be appointed to one of the senior

positions. Just a few hours later, after a surprisingly brief meeting of the EU -27, Swedish PM Reinfeldt appeared at a joint press conference with Commission President Barroso, Van Rompuy and Ashton to introduce, the new leadership of Europe.

¶3. Reinfeldt stressed that the selection process was treaty-based, implying full consultation of his fellow EU leaders, and that the decision was reached with the unanimous backing of all leaders.

He expressed confidence that the personal qualities of Belgian PM Van Rompuy will make him an excellent choice for guiding the European Council's work for the next two and half years. As for Catherine Ashton (who, as Reinfeldt noted, served as Leader of the House of Lords when the Lisbon Treaty was ratified in the UK), her nomination remains subject to the European Parliament's overall approval of the new Barroso Commission, which may come in January. (COMMENT: The Commission spokeswoman indicated November 20 that Ashton might be able to take up her duties congruent with Lisbon's entry into force; i.e., December 1, pending possible early consultations with the European Parliament. We are in uncharted waters. END COMMENT) Reinfeldt also announced that the Frenchman Pierre de Boissieu, currently Deputy Secretary-General of the EU Council, would become Secretary-General.

¶4. Barroso praised Reinfeldt's leadership, hailing a decision taken by consensus. He offered Reinfeldt a Rubik's cube, joking that the Swedish PM managed to find the perfect combination for the

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EU top jobs (the deal offers a balance of trade-offs between small and large EU countries, right and left, male and female, etc.). Openly showing his personal satisfaction with the selection of Ashton (the only Baroness I can call Cathy), Barroso said it would have been impossible to find a better choice for the two jobs. The selection of Van Rompuy, said Barroso, is a tribute to Belgium, a founding member of the European Community, and the expression of the EU's gratitude to Belgium for its constant support to the great European project. Barroso was confident that the European Council would benefit from the intelligent, wise leadership of Van Rompuy. Barroso pledged to work in full loyalty with the two and in full respect for their qualities and responsibilities.

NOMINEES'S FIRST WORDS

¶5. Reading from prepared notes, Van Rompuy confessed that it was difficult for him to relinquish the direction of his country; however, he accepted the decision as a mark of recognition for Belgium. He had not sought this high office and did not make any demarche to obtain it, he added, but would take it with conviction and enthusiasm. Van Rompuy said he would assume his new duties on January 1, 2010. (Note: Because the Lisbon Treaty will take effect December 1, 2009, i.e., after the six-month Swedish rotating presidency has begun, Sweden will continue to chair meetings of the Council until the end of its term in office, in accordance with a decision by the December 2008 European Council. End Note.)

¶16. Van Rompuy said his new position would bring more coherence and continuity to the work of the European Council of Heads of State and government. He added, A perspective that goes beyond six months will allow us to be better organized where the major multi-annual dossiers are concerned, such as the EU financial framework and the Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs. Van Rompuy emphasized his intention to take all member states' sensitivities into account and to respect the diversity of the EU. He said that only one profile was possible for the new position: a profile of dialogue, unity and action. Proclaiming the EU institutional debate now closed for a long time, Van Rompuy expressed determination to make the new institutional framework operate. He said he would attend Summit meetings around the world to present the EU positions as agreed on by the Council. He described the EU as a Union of values, saying there was no future for this world without many of our values. He made it clear he had no intention of departing from his working habits and would not seek excessive exposure in the media.

¶17. Ashton said it was a measure of her surprise that she had no written speech prepared for this press conference. She paid tribute to HR Javier Solana and Relex Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, whose jobs are combined under the Lisbon Treaty, and from whom she will inherit an incredible amount of work. Both had exercised a kind of quiet diplomacy she was planning to emulate. Ashton said she pledged to represent EU values around the world, and do it in her own way.

¶18. In the question period, Barroso expressed confidence that his new Commission will include eight or nine women. Gender balance had come increasingly to the fore in Strasbourg and Brussels as candidates were debated. To her critics, who complained she had never been elected to public office and lacked experience in foreign policy, Ashton replied: Judge me on what I do. Van Rompuy answered critics on the lack of transparency and democracy of the nomination process by noting that it was treaty-based and that 27 democratically elected leaders had selected him. As for his opinion on whether Turkey should join the EU, he answered that his personal opinion was irrelevant and completely subordinate to the opinion of the Council.

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EUROPE'S PHONE NUMBER - AND NOW?

¶19. Asked the Kissinger question - i.e., Which of you will President Obama be calling and which of you will be calling him? Van Rompuy, known for his wit, answered, We are anxiously waiting for the first phone call! Barroso added that the U.S. Secretary of State would now have a clear interlocutor in the person of Cathy Ashton, who will be our Foreign Minister. On matters other than foreign affairs, he said, it should be understood that the EU is a Union of States and that by definition, our system is more complex than the U.S. or the Chinese one.

COMMENT: RUBIK, INDEED

¶10. Whether or not ideal nominees have emerged, he process of choosing Van Rompuy and Ashton -

aptly symbolized by Barroso's Rubik cube - has involved a high number of crossing-cutting matrices and calculations (gender, political, geographic, national, and 27 permutations thereof) of positions filled and yet to be filled. The result has been met with general satisfaction in EU circles, if only because it did not lead to deadlock, for which the Swedish presidency is owed considerable credit. However, it remains to be seen if the much-heralded EU leadership will stop traffic in Beijing. The repartee over the Kissinger question shows that the EU is very conscious of how its leadership is perceived abroad.

11. Van Rompuy and Ashton will model the new positions. Notwithstanding Van Rompuy's claim that institutional debates are over, there is still much institutionally to be devised, and haggled over, particularly the merger, to be engineered by Ashton, of the Commission's DG RELEX, much of the Council's General Secretariat, and parts of Member States' diplomatic bureaucracies to form the EU's External Action Service (ref C). And much to be devised particularly regarding the working relationship, to be set by Van Rompuy, between him and the continuing rotating six-month presidencies among the member state countries.

MURRAY